



Jackson Purchase Historical
Society

Volume 26 | Number 1

Article 2

6-1999

Interviewing Grandmother

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1999) "Interviewing Grandmother," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*. Vol. 26 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol26/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jackson Purchase Historical Society by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu.

INTERVIEWING GRANDMOTHER

Sarah Weitlauf

Dressed in work clothes, hands red from steaming and peeling wallpaper, body tired from the labor and time of day, my grandmother sits in her chair in her living room, submitting herself to a wasteful moment's rest and the probing of my questions. Hung on the wall above her head, an 8"x10" picture of Jesus, a crucifix above that, and other such articles sprinkled around the room and through the house, revealing to any visitor--who doesn't already know--her strict, German-Catholic upbringing and beliefs. My grandmother, born, raised, and still living in Paducah, Kentucky, talked with me on the telephone one Saturday afternoon and gave me insight into thoughts that completely "blew me away."

It was strange how she tried to get around some of my questions: women's being oppressed in today's society leads to talk of feminism, which she doesn't really know about, but opposes fervently. I found out, many follow-up questions later, that there was much equality in the household she grew up in. On a farm in rural Kentucky, somewhere around 1930, if work needed to be done, it was done, no matter what gender you were. She and her sisters were taught to be ladies, and all of her siblings were taught to honor and respect their elders. What you were told was what you did, and there were no questions asked about it. I know she brought out this aspect of her upbringing because I've always been a very outspoken individual, even as a small child. My arguing my opinions with her is something she always has had a problem with. This makes me think of Bell Hooks' essay, "Talking Back." My grandmother is

now a fairly outspoken woman, but her opinions follow Catholic doctrine to the letter. I wonder what kind of person my grandmother would have been if she had claimed her voice as a child. I can't even think what she would be like if she didn't have her religion since it's been most of her life from conception until now.

She attended Catholic school from first to twelfth grade, on the outskirts of Paducah, a farming community called St. John. That the area was staunchly Catholic can be heard in the place name. I was surprised to find out that there were more girls than boys in her high school, but she explained, "The boys started to be taken out at fifth grade, like your grandpa. Their families needed them to work on the farms. Only the boys who did really well in school made it all the way to high school graduation."

She told me a story about how she had always wanted to be a nun. When she got out of high school, she turned down numerous scholarships because of her dream of devoting her life solely to God. She had gone through all the procedures of entering the convent; the only thing that was left was an entrance physical. When the results of the physical came back, it said she had a heart murmur, a condition unbeknownst to her until that day. Because of this condition, she was denied acceptance into the convent. Grandmother told me, "Ever since I was a small child, I saw myself in the convent for most of my life." I asked her if that experience had shaken her faith at all. She told me very bluntly, "It just wasn't God's plan. He altered everything." Hearing that impressed me very much. I really admire her for such extreme strength of faith.

Then the interview turned to the topic of women's lives today and how these are different from her own young adult, and then, adult life. She began by contrasting clothing from these two eras. She said, "Today, women's clothing is pitiful, young women's especially." I found out through this interview, that my grandmother has two theories about the rise of divorce in America. The first one, as she sees it, is that today's trend towards more immodest dress is a temptation to men. Such immodesty can lead to adultery, which leads to divorce. "There's so much evil in the world now," she told me.

Grandmother recognizes that there are increasingly more women in the professional field. While she thinks this situation is generally desirable, she has her doubts, too. This is where her second theory on divorce comes in: Since there are more women in professional fields today than there were when she was young, she sees more of them putting their jobs before their homes. With more women not committing their lives mostly to their homes, their households fall apart and their marriages break up. She connects the influx of evil in the world and the rise in "scantily clad" women with the rise in one-parent households and the birth of children out of wedlock or to divorced mothers.

I almost dropped the telephone, or her staid Catholic position was almost knocking it out of my hands. I couldn't believe these words had just come out of my grandmother's mouth. I wanted to sit her down and enlighten her, make her read essays, books, poetry--tell her how blind she really was. But I knew what would happen. She would tell me my opinions were all just feminist propaganda, then lecture me on how

feminism leads to activism, which, of course, leads to evil. It was hard for me to accept the fact that my own grandmother thought this way. But, as I have experienced, many Southern Catholic women are very set in their ways. Changing their minds will take something close to--well--a miracle. She finished this part of the interview by telling me that when she was growing up, there was no divorce: "Women were taught to put their homes first. They didn't leave the house very much anyway, so if there was a problem, they would work it out or learn to live with it because leaving wasn't an option."

The conversation then returned to young women: "Young women are so lazy now," she said. (If she only knew, I thought to myself.) She told me that she raised all of her six children--my father was the first one--to learn to work. If they didn't work for it, they didn't get it. Her children didn't take advantages for granted, as so many women do these days. She ended the conversation by telling me that young women in her day "wouldn't have dared" to leave the house wearing what young women wear today.

This interview brought out a lot about my grandmother that I never knew. It was hard not to argue against her views, but resisting the temptation gave me a great insight into my beliefs about feminism and the Catholic Church. Finding out more about my grandmother's beliefs and upbringing has shown me how the church tends to oppress women. It makes me wonder whether there are more Catholic women in the world like me: women who have their own ideas, but still embrace the Catholic faith. And, if there are, what are these women doing toward getting more gender equality into church doctrine and teachings? Hearing her story

makes me even more thankful that I was raised by an outspoken Southern woman like my mother. Who knows how I would have turned out if it hadn't been for her Methodist upbringing (she converted to Catholicism when she married my father) and her growing up in the 'sixties. Even though I rarely agree with my grandmother, I'm still very thankful that she has been an influence on my life. She has tried to instill some discipline in me and has shown me a traditional side of my faith--a side, without her, I would have never seen. She has also brought me closer to my faith. Hearing her views sharpens mine, which inspires me to include them in my faith, making Catholicism more my own. Her tireless meetings, prayers, volunteer work and church attendance, all devoted to God, encourage me to play a more active role in my faith. My interview with my grandmother has shown me what an amazing woman she really is.

Paducah, Kentucky

